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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MONROVIA 000578

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W PDAVIS AND DRL SCOOKIE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KCRM](#) [ECON](#) [LI](#)  
SUBJECT: TRC ENTERS THEMATIC HEARINGS PHASE, REQUESTS  
NINE-MONTH EXTENSION

Classified By: CDA Brooks Robinson for reasons 1.4 B and D.

[¶1.](#) (U) SUMMARY. The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) recently completed individual public hearings in all fifteen counties and has now entered its "thematic public hearings" phase. The various themes include: women, children and youth, economic crimes, religious and traditional culture, external actors, and specific reconciliation ceremonies for major massacres. These hearings are being organized in conjunction with civil society groups, which is greatly increasing the public's interest in the proceedings. The TRC has asked the Legislature to approve a nine-month extension to its mandate (until June 30, 2009) so it can continue these thematic hearings, but it is not clear that the Legislature will approve the request. END SUMMARY.

WOMEN'S HEARING WELL ATTENDED

[¶2.](#) (U) The TRC and the Women in Peace Building Network jointly organized a special thematic hearing July 14 on the role of women in the conflict. Many participants described how they were displaced to neighboring countries and sometimes had to make a heart-wrenching choice between carrying a young child or elderly parent long distances through the bush to safety. They described being raped and forced to cook for their attackers. Other women told of how they tried to catch babies who fell when the adult holding them was shot to death. Approximately 200 women resolved to support each other through their grief and work together to give Liberia a brighter future.

COMMEMORATION OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH MASSACRE

[¶3.](#) (U) On the night of July 14, 1990 about 2,000 ethnic Mano and Gio civilians sought refuge in Monrovia's St. Peter's Lutheran Church from ethnic Krahn Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) soldiers loyal to former President Samuel Kanyon Doe. The AFL stormed the compound and set fire to the church, killing approximately 600 people. On July 15, 2008, the TRC and the Liberian Council of Churches organized a somber candlelit memorial service to mark the 18th anniversary of the massacre. Hundreds of victims and relatives participated in the ceremony. Following the event, they put on TRC t-shirts and marched through the city in support of justice and reconciliation.

PRINCE JOHNSON AGREES TO TESTIFY TO THE TRC

[¶4.](#) (SBU) Two particularly noteworthy things happened during the Lutheran Church memorial service. The head of the Catholic Church in Liberia, Monsignor Karnley, reiterated his call for a War Crimes Tribunal to be set up for Liberia, arguing true forgiveness can only happen alongside real justice. He received a standing ovation. Immediately afterwards, Senator Prince Johnson (Independent-Nimba County) spoke highly of his support for the TRC and vowed to appear before the "august" body August 26, without reiterating any

of his previous conditions such as the resignation of the TRC Chairman or requiring that the killers of Tolbert testify first. He said he hoped the TRC would bring real healing to Liberia and pledged to support the nine-month extension request.

15. (SBU) Senator Johnson confirmed to PolEconCouns July 23 that he would appear before the TRC without preconditions, but said that he would limit his testimony to events after the rigged election in 1985. He stated that election set the stage for events in 1990 when Johnson, at the time a rebel leader, assassinated President Doe, sparking a 14-year civil war. Johnson also said the Sawyer government, which was "elected" in exile in the Gambia, backed his rebellion against Doe. He plans to point out that sitting TRC Commissioner Sheikh Kafumba F. Konneh was part of the Sawyer government, and therefore supported his actions during the period. Johnson also confirmed that he supported the nine-month extension so that those who are delaying their appearance will not be let off the hook.

#### PARTICIPATION IN THEMATIC MEMORIALS HEALING TO VICTIMS

16. (U) Participants in both the women's hearings and the Lutheran Church event told PolOff that while these sessions opened old wounds temporarily, they led to a sense of closure and reconciliation in the end. By helping civil society partner groups organize thematic hearings/memorial services, former victims are finding a way to work through their experiences and move on. Members of the Women in Peace Building Network used drama to convey the pain many of them went through being raped and having their relatives killed.

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They hoped they were helping to educate the public so that the experience would never be repeated. Several attendees of the Lutheran Church ceremony said they were "very grateful" to finally let go of their grief.

#### REQUEST FOR NINE-MONTH EXTENSION OF THE TRC MANDATE

17. (SBU) The TRC formally petitioned the Legislature July 9 to extend the TRC's mandate from September 22, 2008 to June 30, 2009 (a copy of the petition has been sent to AF/W). In the letter, TRC Chairman Jerome Verdier said that the extension was needed because the TRC got off to a slow start but now is contributing to real reconciliation through the thematic hearings, and the work should continue. It is not clear that the Legislature agrees. Some members of the House audibly groaned when Verdier's letter requesting the extension was read on the floor July 15.

#### COMMENT

18. (C) The TRC is gaining credibility with the Liberian public and international observers alike and a nine-month extension would allow the TRC to continue this important work and write a comprehensive report that may contribute to real reconciliation. Some legislators may oppose the continuation of the TRC because they are worried that the longer the hearings continue, the more likely it is that their own actions during the conflict will be publicly disclosed. We can assume that Prince Johnson is feeling public pressure to come clean and is calculating that cooperation with the TRC now could save him from appearing in front of a possible War Crimes Court later. His defense is likely to be that he was "in the front lines" doing deeds the Sawyer government supported, while it was safely in "exile" the Gambia. We hope that Prince Johnson's surprise support of the TRC's mandate extension will convince other legislators to vote in favor of the extra time as well.

ROBINSON